DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 344 FL 017 058

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TITLE Issues and Answers in Extending the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines to the Less Commonly Taught Languages.
INSTITUTION Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS African Languages; Arabic; Code Switching (Language); Diglossia; Educational Resources; Hindi; Indonesian; *Language Proficiency; Program Descriptions; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; Sociocultural Patterns; *Standards; Teaching Guides; *Testing Problems; *Test Use; *Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *ACTFL ETS Language Proficiency Guidelines

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the use of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines in teaching and testing less commonly taught languages (LCTL) describes a two-year project on that topic and looks at specific problems with four languages or language groups. The project was to familiarize LCTL teachers with the guidelines through a series of workshops, and to provide a forum for examining issues involved in adapting them for LCTL use. The languages discussed include: Arabic and the problem of diglossia, with separate standards for spoken and written language; Hindi and the issue of code-switching to and from English; Indonesian and the importance of sociolinguistic rules that are rigid and necessary to even basic proficiency in that language; and African languages and the problem of limited resources for instructional development in such a large and diverse language group. Much work remains to be done in extending the use of the guidelines beyond the commonly taught languages because of the issues not encountered in working with western languages. (MSE)

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# Issues and Answers in Extending the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines to the Less Commonly Taught Languages

(ACTFL Guidelines)

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November 1987

FL017058

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# Issues and Answers in Extending the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines to the Less Commonly Taught Languages

From the foundation laid by the Foreign Service Institute Oral Proficiency Interview, the proficiency testing movement in the United States has extended beyond government and into academia. The primary movers behind this extension have been the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS). In 1981 ACTFL-ETS undertook the writing of proficiency testing guidelines in all skill areas for the commonly taught languages (Spanish, French and German) and published the first set of provisional generic guidelines a year later.

As the circle of languages for which guidelines were being written widened to include non-Western languages, new issues in developing language specific guidelines began to emerge. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and ACTFL, recognizing the need for these issues to be more

widely discussed in academia, jointly undertook a recently-completed two-year project with support from the Department of Education. The goal of the project was two-fold: 1) to familiarize teachers of the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) as to what proficiency testing guidelines are and to clear up common misconceptions about them, and 2) to provide a forum for the issues involved in adapting proficiency testing guidelines already used in the commonly taught languages to the LCTLs. The project goals were achieved through the organization and sponsorship of special workshops during 1986 and 1987 for teachers of targeted LCTLs and through the publication and distribution of a special project volume of articles and working papers. Workshops related to the project together with target languages and principle presenter were held at the following conferences: March 23, 1986, at the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) meeting in Chicago (Hindi--Rosane Rocher); November 7-9, 1986, at the South Asian Studies conference at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (Hindi--Vijay Gambhir); April 10 and 11, 1987 at the AAS meeting in Boston (Hindi--Vijay Gambhir,

Indonesian--John Wolff); and April 22 and 23, 1987, preceding the first annual symposium on Arabic Languages and Literature at the University of Utah (Arabic--Roger Allen). Although the format of each workshop varied somewhat, generally they consisted of a demonstration of the Interagency Language Roundtable Oral Proficiency Interview in the target language and discussions of the application of the guidelines to the target language. The workshops were coordinated by David Hiple of ACTFL.

The project volume, which will be published in ERIC, is a collection of reprinted articles and specially commissioned works published under the auspices of the Center for Applied Linguistics. It contains the 1986 generic ACTFL proficiency testing guidelines, introductory articles for those who are new to proficiency testing, and articles presenting the current thinking in adapting the guidelines to the LCTLs. Also included is an updated version of the 1984 "Topical Bibliography of Proficiency Related Issues," which stands as a valuable resource of information on the development of the guidelines and their application to classroom instruction and testing, proficiency concepts and

the issue of accuracy. The final project task was the distribution of the volume to over 200 professionals in the field of foreign language education, particulary in the LCTLs.

A number of issues that were raised during the course of the project may interest a wider audience in foreign language education. These are summarized below. It is hoped that the presentation here of these language specific issues discussed during the project will stimulate further progress in extending the guidelines to the LCTLs.

Arabic and the Problem of Diglossia

In developing oral (and aural) proficiency guidelines, Arabic presents the problem of a diglossic situation in which there are separate standards for the spoken language and the written language. Although Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), learned by Arab speakers in school and used widely by the media, presents a standard for the written language, there is no one dominant form of spoken Arabic in the Arab world. The "educated native speaker" of Arabic (the standard on which the oral proficiency guidelines are ultimately based) in

most everyday situations uses the local colloquial dialect, whether in Morocco, Egypt or Lebanon. In writing the Arabic guidelines for oral proficiency, however, it is clearly impractical for guidelines to be drawn up or tests be given for all the different colloquial languages. A practical and admittedly compromise solution chosen by Roger Allen (1985: 49-50) and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania in writing the provisional Arabic guidelines for ACTFL was to use MSA for all language skills. This has the advantage of allowing one uniform set of standards to be written. In addition, MSA is the most commonly taught form of Arabic in the United States. However, such guidelines do not adequately reflect the "real world" use of spoken Arabic.

Another solution would be to prepare oral proficiency guidelines for a major colloquial dialect, such as Egyptian, while using MSA for the reading and writing proficiency testing. However, the choice of the dialect is problematic and in the end may be a reflection of political and pragmatic considerations (48-49).

Standard procedure for the oral proficiency

interview in Arabic currently is to present the stimuli in MSA but accept appropriate responses in any colloquial Arabic, as well as in MSA. Although MSA is not the language of daily conversation, control of MSA can be reasonably accepted as a mark of an educated native speaker at the highest levels of proficiency when required by the context (e.g. giving a formal speech, delivering an academic lecture). Ultimately, as Allen (1987: 3-4) points out in a paper written for this project, oral proficiency ratings will need to reflect the use of MSA and colloquial dialects in various socio-linguistic situations following rules used by educated native speakers themselves.

In the final analysis, as Allen states, before a solution to the problem of the diglossic situation in Arabic can be reached, there will need to be agreement among Arabists as to how far the Arabic guidelines should reflect "(a) the 'realities' of the Arab World; (b) the cultural politics of the region; (c) the aspirations of native-speakers in the different regions" (1987: 8). Until that question is answered, no final definitive form of Arabic guidelines can ever be

written.

Hindi and the Problem of Code-Switching

Hindi presents a challenge to the development of proficiency testing guidelines in a way similar to the above. In this case the diglossia is in a different form, namely Hindi-English code-switching. While code-switching is in many languages an indication of low level ability, appropriate Hindi-English code-switching is the mark of an educated native Hindi speaker. This occurs, as Gambhir points out, because of the dominant presence of English (e.g. as the language of instruction in higher education and as the status of a national language):

> For instance, an engineer, or a diplomat living in Delhi or Agra would most likely use Hindi at home, in the street, with friends, and with colleagues at work in informal; settings but as far as his use of language for professional use in formal settings is concerned, English has the highest priority of being used. (2)

Moreover, there are definite rules for Hindi-English code switching pertaining to register and context and ruled by the constraints of Hindi grammar. Thus, while Hindi-English code-switching

represents lesser proficiency in everyday survival situations in a country where only 2% of the population can be classified as educated native speakers, being able to switch codes demonstrates greater proficiency in most formal, professional settings.

One solution to this problem is to define oral proficiency testing guidelines in terms of the purpose for which the non-native speaker is learning Hindi. Thus, while educated native speakers of Hindi on the whole may not have the opportunity to develop their formal higher level oral linguistic skills in Hindi, foreigners studying Hindi for literature and cultural research may be expected to attain a mastery above the norm for educated native speakers. At the opposite extreme, in the context of national and international business, English may be so commonly used as the language of communication that the need for any Hindi proficiency is excluded altogether.

In Hindi, as in other LCTLs, there has not been enough experience to provide information as to what degree of accuracy in the language-specific factors at the phonological, morphological and

syntactic levels, as well as control at the discourse and socio-linguistic levels, should characterize the different levels of the proficiency scale. As a solution to this problem, Gambhir proposes an approach to setting descriptions that may be useful in other LCTLs as well. The approach is two-pronged. First, a linguistic analysis would be carried out on a large number of interviews conducted and rated according to the generic proficiency guidelines at different levels. The results would be used to form tentative descriptions of linguistic control at each proficiency level. Next, trained teachers and scholars would collectively adjust these descriptions based on their observations and experience. This approach would be objective in that it is data-based yet meet the intuitions and observations of experienced language specialists.

## Indonesian and the Importance of Sociolinguistic Factors

Adapting the oral proficiency testing guidelines to Indonesian, according to John Wolff in a paper written expressly for this project, does

not present any insurmountable problems (5). Wolff has already done some preliminary work in adapting training for ESL proficiency rating to Indonesian students at Cornell.

In developing guidelines for Indonesian, as for Hindi, research will need to be done to determine which features of grammar, vocabulary and organization are characteristic at each proficiency level. In addition, special emphasis will need to be given to the candidate's ability to make use of appropriate style, register and sociolinguistic rules which are quite rigid and quite necessary to even basic proficiency in Indonesian. As Wolff points out:

> Whereas a linguistic faux pas may be the cause of amusement or discomfort in Europe, in Indonesia it can be the cause of serious tensions. Unfortunately, Indonesian is one of those languages in which almost every time one opens one's mouth, a strong statement is made about human relations, social status, and the kind of person everyone involved in the conversation is. (6-7)

Because of the extreme importance of the socio-linguistic function of the language, oral proficiency testing for Indonesian will need to develop stimuli that allows the examinee to

demonstrate a mastery of socio-linguistic routines in a wide variety of contexts.

## African Languages and the Problem of Limited Resources

For the familiarization project it was decided to concentrate on the problems confronting the African languages area as a whole, rather than concentrate on a single language. The African language group presents a rather difficult situation for the drafting of language-specific proficiency guidelines. Considering 1) that there are between 1500 and 2000 languages spoken in Africa, 2) that the demand for instruction in the United States is quite low, and 3) that resources for instruction are limited, there is consensus in the field that guidelines will be drafted for a relatively small number of these languages. Nonetheless, African language specialists and the Title VI African Studies Centers have already made inroads into the task. First, agreement has been reached on categorizing 82 primary African languages into three groups according to priority. Next, a list of scholars able to review proficiency

interviews by language and school has been compiled. In addition, a major survey and evaluation of language teaching materials in light of teaching for proficiency has been carried out.[1]

Given the limitations on resources in the African languages, Dwyer and Hiple propose that the ACTFL Team Testing model is the most feasible approach (3-4). In this approach, the oral interview is conducted by two persons instead of one: a native speaker of the target language who is not a trained proficiency evaluator and an ACTFL trained and certified evaluator who is not necessarily proficient in the target language. In light of this, a three year plan has been agreed to among African linguists that includes the organization of standard ACTFL Workshops in English, French and/or Arabic as the languages of certification in 1988. In 1989, workshops will be undertaken to prepare instructions for the native speakers employed in the above mentioned team model. In 1990, workshops for the establishing of language specific guidelines for Hausa and Swahili will be held, as well as one to finalize the development of the ACTFL team model.

Conclusions

The above discussion makes it clear that much work remains to be done in extending the proficiency guidelines beyond the commonly taught languages. The task raises issues not presented encountered when working with the Western languages. However, some practical suggestions for solutions have been presented here. Further discussion of the issues and suggestions of solutions will continue to be needed, for the development of both the generic and language specific proficiency testing guidelines is clearly an ongoing process. As the introduction to the new set of generic ACTFL proficiency testing guidelines published in 1986 states:

> The 1986 guidelines should not be considered the definitive version, since the construction and utilization of language proficiency guidelines is a dynamic, interactive process. The academic sector, like the government sector, will continue to refine and update the criteria periodically to reflect the needs of the users and the advances of the profession.

The recently completed joint ACTFL/CAL project for the familiarization of teachers of the LCTLs

with the guidelines has been one significant part of this dynamic process.

NOTES

1. For further information see A Resource Handbook for African Languages (compiled by David J. Dwyer) (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 280 274) and The Design and Evaluation of African Language Learning Materials (edited by David J. Dwyer) (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 281 357). They are also available from the African Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

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